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von gast

in Außenpolitik,
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Kommentare (2)

Australia and Japan: under the nuclear shadow of a Chinese Dragon

by Chris Lee-Gaston



Recent public, political and media focus on the politics of drones and in the highly speculative field of cyber-warfare have led me recently to do some speculation within my own topic and namely over the specific implications of nuclear power as an energy security question, within the politics of democratic nations. This article provides a brief surmise of two current examples of the critical yet

often indistinct influence of energy security strategy within International Relations, both of which are approached from the perspective of relations with Asia's principal economic and strategic power, China. Discussion of the important Australian and Japanese strategic nuclear relations to China, point towards the pervasive nature of strategic management of unqualified risks within IR: bear with me, while we dig ourselves a rabbit hole...

Japan's Nuclear Conundrum

In a world where global warming constitutes a legitimate question for national energy and security strategy and in light of the continued influence of anti-nuclear sentiment since the Fukushima Daichii disaster, it seems logical that the debate over nuclear power in Japan remains an incendiary topic. However one of the most highly underestimated influences in this debate is the underlying strategic concern for national energy security.

In this case, I am not talking about securing sufficient future energy supplies to maintain economic growth, but rather the holistic strategic importance encompassed in ensuring national sovereignty through energy independence – an issue with unique importance for the resource-scarce import-dependent island nation. In a world where actual full-scale war could be within 5 or 6 quiet generations of becoming an anthropological topic, it remains the distinct academic responsibility of IR specialists to remind the public that Nations *do* and will *continue to* make many decisions based on the remote possibility that World War III could be around the corner.

Of course, this is not always the cornerstone of strategic policy implementation but it is definitely an omnipresent shadow over the international affairs. In the case of Japan, China is its primary adversary of concern in the region, and as recent contention over **Okinawan**

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sovereignty suggests, Sino-Nippon relations are not always rock-solid. However, the domestic discussion of policy rarely seems to draw focus on this issue – is energy security Japan's own elephant in the room?



In my own research, I am increasingly being reminded that despite a burgeoning debate over the possibility to forward a revised national energy strategy with more emphasis on renewables, toppling nuclear power remains a tall order. While the bulk of this debate hovers around the issues of rising energy costs and a possible negative-growth inducing supply crisis arising thereof (which unlike in the case of Germany, is receiving some disquieting points of affirmation), it should also be noted that on some level there exists an inherent *what if* kind of thinking, as described above. That is, what if a state of war were to open with China: and this leads to the inevitable question as to whether Japan can keep its lights on, without steady imports and without nuclear power?

Plainly put, Japan might not be able to give up nuclear power simply because of its national strategic reliance on nuclear power as a stockpile-friendly, semi import-independent energy source. I will not go as far as to pick over the entrails of this argument herein, but I will assert that Japan's current and future relations with China hold far more sway over the nuclear debate than is currently being given news-time globally. While anti-nuclear protests continue to make headlines internationally and waves on the streets of Tokyo, in the parliament it seems more likely that diplomatic relations with the Dragon across the sea, are casting longer shadows over the nuclear debate.

Australia's Yellow Fortune

Australia's atomic relations with China are a very different story but nevertheless, one with a similarly unquantified influence on the nation's international diplomatic status. Mining as a whole is of great strategic importance to Australia, but it remains to be seen what the exact significance of Australia's uranium deposits will be in the future. Australia's vast and

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Außenpolitik (59)

Bürgerkriege (16)

Cyber Security (42)

Demokratisierung (9)

Drohnen (15)

Humanitäre Interventionen (15)

Innere Sicherheit (24)

Interviews (10)

Katastrophen (4)

Konferenz (20)

Militär (28)

Pandemien (2)

Podcast (7)

Popkultur (21)

Sanktionen (8)

Security Culture (14)

valuable Uranium deposits constitute the world's largest known reserves, and contribute around 35% to the nations **overall energy exports**. This figure set to grow in relation to overall exports despite the relative disfavour of nuclear developments, post-Fukushima. While of this share, the US, EU and Japan are the largest buyers; China is fast becoming a prominent partner in this economic relationship following the closing of concrete long-term export deal with China in recent years.

Australian academics such as **Rory Medcalf** of the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, point primarily to the geo-strategic power evident in this exchange (specifically in relation to Australia's standing refusal to initiate uranium exports to India), as rivalling other political trade-offs such as proliferation concerns or even immediate economic gains. We know that this is taken into some **consideration by government** in the decision making process but it remains unclear how exactly this factors into eventual policy outcomes.

Nevertheless it is clear that uranium has a unique effect on the geo-political standing of Australia in the Asia-pacific region, as far as resource politics are concerned. Granted, 'yellow gold' doesn't hold the same level of power as that other black, barrelled and liquid kind, but nevertheless it is becoming increasingly important, despite continued international vacillation over the future of nuclear power.

As a preferred provider to South East-Asian nations, Australia has a client-privileged relationship, occasionally even superseding large suppliers such as Canada and Kazakhstan. While Australia reserves the right to determine the quantity of its nuclear mineral production, one need not be a fan of J.R. Tolkien to envision the relation between Australia's horde of yellow gold and the sleeping behemoth which dreams upon it: that beast being the powerful, resource-hungry nation of China.

Which begs the question, what would happen to Australia if it's national interests were no longer in line with China's lust for Yellowcake? Of course, numerous groups in Australia are busily researching such questions, but what is most difficult to quantify is to extent even the remote threat of this has an influence over policy making. Medcalf and others might suggest: at least as much as the economic or other considerations such as proliferation, traditionally enumerated in the nuclear debate: and conceivably more than we think.



Logo: Kakadu National Park Uranium Mine, CC BY 2.0 by **Alberto Otero Garcia**

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Tags: **Australia, China, Japan, nuclear, Uranium, Yellowcake**

Sicherheits-Kommunikation (14)

Sicherheitskultur (205)

Sozialwissenschaft Online (57)

Stellenangebote (42)

Strategie (10)

Terrorismus (14)

Theorie (2)

Umwelt (1)

Versichertheitlichung (22)

Visualisierung (5)

Whistleblowing (8)

WikiLeaks (17)

WMD (10)

Zivilgesellschaft (48)

BLOGROLL

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ARCHIV

Wähle den Monat

2 Kommentare zu “Australia and Japan: under the nuclear shadow of a Chinese Dragon”

Ben | 11. Jun. 2013 um 11:13 |

#1

“the holistic strategic importance encompassed in ensuring national sovereignty through energy independence – an issue with unique importance for the resource-scarce import-dependent island nation. In a world where actual full-scale war could be within 5 or 6 quiet generations of becoming an anthropological topic, it remains the distinct academic responsibility of IR specialists to remind the public that Nations do and will continue to make many decisions based on the remote possibility that World War III could be around the corner.”

This is an interesting post overall, but it does engage in some of its own uncritical propaganda. Two points that appeared in rapid succession:

1. The emphasis on ‘import-dependent island nation’. Speaking just of Japan, it’s kind of disingenuous to emphasize import dependency. Could it have developed as it has since WWII without exports? It’s trade dependent, but then, who isn’t? Even N. Korea’s or Myanmar’s clientelist systems depend on subsidized imports and, at least, hard currency. And islands have it relatively easy. If you want to get a headache as a highly trade dependent country, swap places with South Sudan or Kyrgyzstan. The landlocked have it really tough. You just barely imply a parallel between Japan and Australia’s island status, but let’s not forget that both have been heavily trade dependent for at least a century, and China has only been a trader worth mentioning for a couple of decades. *Because* they’re islands, they’ve been able to become so trade dependent in the first place, and trade follows the path of least resistance, which is especially a privilege of islands and coastal states.

2. The WWIII bogeyman. The argument that energy security is important because of the spectre of WWIII can easily be reversed. If you had already decided that you wanted to pursue an unpopular form of energy that might pose an existential threat to your populace for reasons of patronage, which is not such a far-fetched interpretation in Japan’s case, how are you going to sell it? Wouldn’t you have to, or at least be tempted to, invoke an equally desperate threat? And what can compete with the danger of a domestic civilian nuclear holocaust but an international military nuclear holocaust? You don’t have to be Dan Brown or Lyotard to retain a little skepticism toward meta-narratives.

Japan will simply buy its energy from where it wants, and Australia will sell its uranium to whom it wants. How do you know blustering about China is not simply a negotiating tactic or rhetorical fig leaf?

(And be careful with the adjective ‘yellow’ when China-baiting. You don’t want people to start parsing your ‘yellow gold’ fever.)

ANTWORTEN

Christopher Lee-Gaston | 11. Jun. 2013 um 21:21 |

#2

Dear Ben,

Thanks for your comment! Perhaps I've left some essential elaboration owing in relation to the aforementioned points.

Firstly, when describing Japan as an 'import-dependent island nation', it was my intention to indicate the importance of two specific facts. Firstly that Japan has a long-standing lack of natural energy resources (okay, this is not unheard of elsewhere, granted) but also that regardless of what form of energy production they would potentially use: all of them require unanimously high levels of importation. Of available options, Nuclear provides Japan with the longest hold-out potential and remains the most strategically preferable in terms of external interference in supply.

This is only of further relevance to overall import/export and trade considerations insofar as it might potentially inhibit the ability of Japan to supply affordable power to its industrial complex. Unlike Germany, where the early prophesies over blackouts and unresolvable price-hikes remains largely unfulfilled, Japan is facing serious and immediate problems.

Naturally, Japan's success in dealing with this problem historically, speaks directly to their 'miraculous' success as a producer and exporter internationally in the post-WWII era. As rightly inferred, being a trading island nation undoubtedly worked in their favour in terms of economic success. In this sense however, allusions to the trade-related economic hardships of land-locked nations such as Sudan and Kyrgyzstan are irrelevant, as I do not suggest that achieving success has been a problem but rather that maintaining it will be the essential struggle – how does one of the world's foremost economies retain its prominence in light of recent nuclear events? At least currently it seems, not by unequivocally revoking nuclear power.

disingenuous to emphasis of import dependency? Although rightly said that no country, island or otherwise, has achieved comparable economic success without trade: the case it is clear that Japan's relationship to China is politically antagonistic to their continued strategic condition. This problem is exemplified by the continued indecision over the fate of nuclear power in Japan – to which this relationship with China is undoubtedly relevant although to what final extent in the overall plethora of influences, remains unclear.

Nevertheless, it constitutes a woefully under-examined topic in the post-Fukushima era. The reality of another World War is admittedly irrelevant and as you point out, it could very well be that posturing about conflict in policy is intended to provoke a certain reaction. However this is merely another facet of the very same as-yet indistinct policy influence that China has in both nations in different ways. When one concludes that Japan will buy its energy from wherever it wants and Australia will sell its resources to whomever it sees fit, one makes the same fundamental oversight that dominates the civilian nuclear power debate: that just because a nation has chosen to incorporate nuclear power, does not mean that it can so easily opt out of its role in the cycle and the cumbersome political associations therein.

Fig leaf or political blustering in tow: that decision making in regards to nuclear energy (production and/or consumption) in both Australia and Japan is related in a fundamental way to relations with China, is abundantly clear. Whether or not this construed political narrative between governments and the public sphere will read more like a Tom Clancy or a Dan Brown novel, remains up for discussion.

That Australia and Japan are both geographically islands is only the second of two congruencies between these nations (and a coincidental one at that). While I am clearly drawing a parallel in that China holds influence over their respective policy strategies, this should not be taken to mean that the Australia and Japanese strategies hold any kind of similarity beyond this stated influence. Furthermore I would suggest that Japan's problem is less to do with it being physically an island and rather more to do with it being historically the odd man out in Asia: or a political island, so to speak.

Lastly, I certainly did not intend to construct any inference between yellow gold and the use of yellow as a slanderous adjective. The use of 'yellow gold' refers simultaneously to the resemblance that processed yellow cake has to gold, its inherent material worth and on an interesting historical note; to the fact that some early uranium deposits were discovered in gold mines. I would hope that my lack of forethought thereof, speaks for my lack of intention to utilise the word 'yellow' with a deprecating undertone.

In relation to China-baiting, let me make it abundantly clear that I do not seek at any point in this article to criticise the inherent role of China in this stratego-political condition. My intention is only to point to the possible implication of such relationships within the context of security, national governmental policy and international relations. I hope that addresses the bulk of your observations.

Thanks again for the opportunity to provide further comment!

Best,
Christopher Lee-Gaston

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